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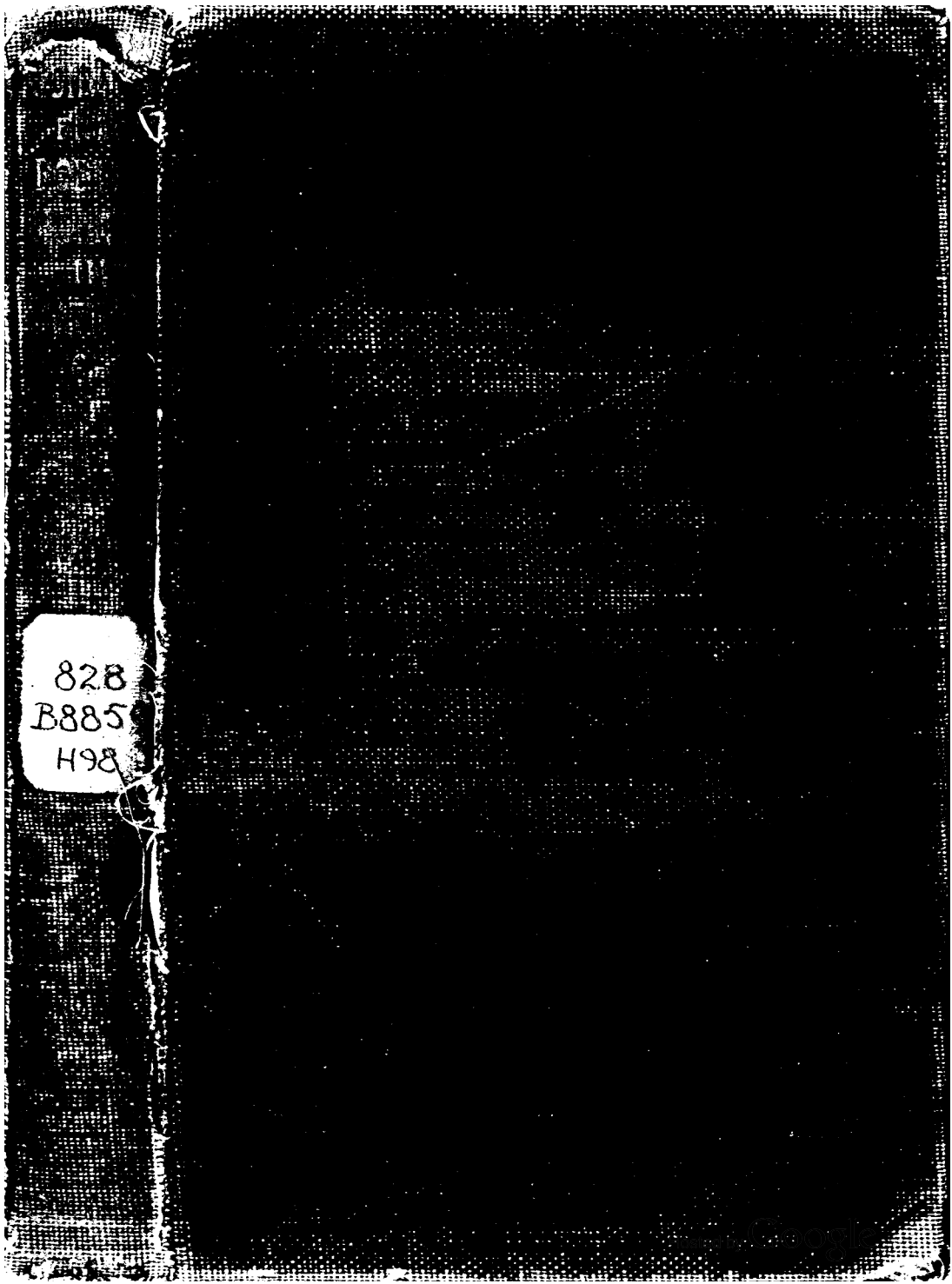
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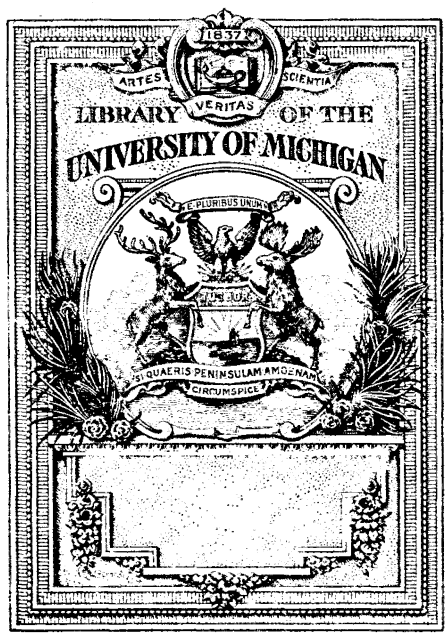
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Guidance from

ROBERT BROWNING

in Matters of Faith

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ROBERT BROWNING

in Matters of Faith

BY

JOHN A. HUTTON, M.A.

Edinburgh and London

OLIPHANT, ANDERSON & FERRIER

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To
MY WIFE

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Prefatory Note

THE four lectures which appear here as four chapters, were given by the writer to a considerable class which met on Sunday evenings during a winter. Each lecture served as an introduction to a detailed study of Browning's work from the point of view of that particular lecture. This may explain something in the literary manner of the book—a certain intimacy and, in Chapter IV., an undue (as it may be thought) personal note.

Those who are themselves indebted to Browning for a solid or sufficient footing in the deeper things of life will not consider any book superfluous which, however poorly executed it may be, has as its one sincere idea and reason, not to estimate the poet or to admire him, but simply to urge his message as offering in these days of ours a basis and motive for faith and hope and love.

J. A. H.

1903.

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The Case for Belief

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The Case for Belief

LET me say a word or two, at the outset, on the general title—"Guidance from Robert Browning in Matters of Faith." In matters of faith, the utmost that any one can do for us, is to give us guidance. No man can give his faith to another, any more than he can give another his imagination or his private history. Faith—the faith of which alone we wish to think, is in every case a personal thing and rests upon reasons which reach down to the hidden and unfathomable things of a man's own life. The region where belief sits upon the throne or where the throne is empty, lies far from the frontier and circumference of our life; it is the last recess and solitude of our spirit. Into that region none can intrude. It is a man's own home. There he lives with himself and can

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have no companion—unless it be God. In all the deep things we are strangers to each other. I cannot, therefore, thrust my faith upon you. I cannot compel you to believe for reasons which satisfy me. Strictly speaking, I cannot give you my very reasons for believing: for after all had been said that I might say, I could not give you my own point of view. I cannot tell you of all the subtle movements in my interior life, the play of circumstances, the formation of personal events, the kind of assault they make upon me, the lights and the shadows which pass over my soul, and which mean something quite clear to me. I cannot tell you of the very things—the voices and the silences—which make me sure of God. Even if I could make these quite plain to myself and if I were to speak of them to you, they would lose in the telling the very qualities—the hiddenness and the personalness—which make them irresistible for me. And then, when all was said, I might not

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have touched you; I might not have said anything which had any real meaning for you. For, it is the very essence of belief that it must be your own. It must be *born* within you, and, like a true child, must spring from the very stuff your life is made of.

That is all true, and it seems to mean that we can do nothing for each other in this great matter. But it is not so. I only wish to make plain, at the outset, that one cannot compel faith in another, that, even when the argument for belief has pushed its way into the very citadel of the soul, there a man is still impregnable. He is still secure within an inviolable shrine. He must choose to yield, he must consent to believe. The door of that innermost stronghold opens only at his own touch from within. Nevertheless we can do a great deal for each other in these most personal matters. We can speak humbly to others about such difficulties as we ourselves may have passed through. If we are indebted to some great or good man

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for giving us a new point of view, a way of looking at things which confirmed our faith when it had been disturbed, we can do our best to make others see as we see now. In any case, we can try to feel together the seriousness and mystery of this life of ours, so that if we do not attain to a clear and final faith in God, we may at least lose our flippancy and boldness as we come within sight of the stern facts of life and the forebodings which they stir. Anything, of course, that one may say by way of guidance is of no value except to those who are in earnest. We cannot compel the proverbial horse to drink;—we always knew that; but if the horse determines to be rebellious, we cannot even lead him to the well.

I have been saying that belief can never be thrust into a life by force of argument or discussion, that in the last resort belief rests upon certain personal secrets which lead a man to embrace such proofs as are offered. In the same way, the denial of God—for

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denial and not *doubt* is the true contrary to belief—(the denial of God) arises in nearly every case—if you inquired carefully, or if you could see below the surface—from a certain stiffness and rebelliousness, and this attitude has been brought about by the events of the man's own personal history.

We make a serious mistake if we suppose that unbelief comes about in a majority of cases, as the result of intellectual difficulties. The most and worst that such difficulties can produce in an ingenuous mind is doubt or prayer. But denial—the harsh and dogged opposition to the ideal or spiritual view of human existence—arises within a man, I must believe, because of certain experiences, *e.g.* in the region of his emotions. Perhaps, in his youth, he dreamed a dream; but the world mocked him, and so he determined to dream no more. Or he aimed at something, and he missed it; or he trusted a friend, and was betrayed. Or he loved a woman, and she broke her word or he broke his.

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Or death snatched his young wife from his newly-lighted home and the light that was in him became darkness. It is life, it is experience which inclines the heart to faith or to denial, and those are some of the bitter things which—unless we take pains—poison the roots of a life, so that the man needs to be born again, the hard crust of atheism needs to be broken up by some still more acute distress, or by some amazingly good thing before he can believe in God.

Now, I should say, it is my personal testimony, that Robert Browning is never of such value as just in those days when something bitter has befallen us, and we are on the point of angrily blowing out our light. He is a real friend to any one who has been defeated, or who has been left behind in the race. He can in a wonderful way lay his hand upon your shoulder when you have failed. If at such a time you listen to his words, the milk of human kindness within you will not turn sour. When you would like "to curse

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God," Browning can break in upon your narrow passion, with a strong, hopeful word; and behold the narrow walls fall flat as did the walls of Jericho, and you see the things that compensate. He would like to come near you in the dark and dizzy moments of your life, to sit beside you, and wait till you are well. He will discover to you "the light which is in the midst of your cloud," or, at the worst, he will promise you a day when the "wind will come and cleanse your sky." That is one level—I mean the emotional life—on which Robert Browning meets a man and helps him on or helps him back to faith in God. Browning knew that the incidents of our life—the silent defeats, disillusionments, betrayals—give a man his point of view, his way of looking at things; that these sow the seeds of what may become harsh and hopeless unbelief.

Therefore he tries to get alongside a man in all the various discomfitures of life. He would fain sing him a song to heal his wound.

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He appeals to us not to give way to rash decisions because of any private shock, to remember that the soul is greater than its mere circumstances, that even in the last push and stress of evil fortune a man may call upon his soul and be supreme. It is perhaps here more than anywhere else that Browning best serves the cause of faith, by going up and down the ranks, putting new heart into men, calling upon the brave still to be brave and braver yet, rebuking the cowardly with a lash of contempt, whispering something to the faint, and pleading with those who have sunk to the rear. This service, however, great as it is, and directly on the side of belief—I mean his bracing treatment of the human soul in all its nineteenth-century moods—is not what readers of Browning have come to look upon as his peculiar guidance in matters of faith. When one uses the phrase, "Guidance from Robert Browning in matters of faith," he means and is understood to mean, the help which in

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his works generally Browning gives to those who feel the difficulty of believing. He means the light which Browning sheds upon the peculiar questions of our time, his interpretation of those facts in the human situation which seem inconsistent with the Sovereignty of a Just and Loving God. And, above every other distinction, that is Browning's value for us. He is the great Apologist of these last days, the man of God to our peculiar age. He has ranged through the vast world of nature, and the vaster world of the human soul, in his vigorous contention with unbelief. He is splendidly equipped for the long and intricate battle. "When British literature," said Carlyle of Scott and Cobbett, "lay all puking and sprawling in Wertherism, Byronism, and other sentimentalisms, nature was kind enough to send us two healthy men." Browning is a healthy man, a man of boundless spirits and untiring energy. He takes a ditch at a leap, and the momentum of his rush carries him to the top

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of any hill of difficulty. There he takes breath, and gazes on the grand horizon, and in a moment is pressing forward on some further toil. That is one side of Browning's qualification to be the prophet of our time. But a fund of good spirits is not faith. Faith—and certainly, the only kind of faith which will satisfy us now—faith must be aware of all the difficulties. Faith must be able to maintain itself in the face of all the grimness and sordidness of the human situation. Now Browning's faith is of that kind. His is not the faith of a man who shuts his eyes and deceives himself: belief, in his case, is the strenuous search for and discovery of God in all and through all and over all. Browning saw the things that make faith hard to hold. He eyed those things all his days. His very finest words have no meaning unless you remember the dark things to which they were given as an answer or a challenge. But he never sat down and lamented the human lot. He took off his

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coat and wrestled with the enemy till the breaking of the day. "Does anyone suppose that faith is an easy thing for me?" he seems to ask. "Nay; it is a long victory, *i.e.* a long battle."

"With me, faith means perpetual unbelief
Kept quiet, like the snake 'neath Michael's foot
Who stands calm *just because he feels it writhe.*"
(*Blougram.*)

"All's doubt in me! (where then is my faith?)
It is the idea, the feeling and the love
God means mankind should strive for and show forth."
(*Blougram.*)

"This is the glory—that in all conceived,
Or felt or known, I recognised a mind,
Not mine but like mine—for the double joy—
Making all things for me, and me for Him."
(*Prince Hohenstiel Schwangan.*)

And now I wish to work my way through a statement according to Robert Browning, a mature and deliberate statement as I hold, of the case for belief. I wish you to face with me certain difficulties in the way of belief,

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and to consider what Browning has to say to them. Browning was engaged throughout his whole life on this subject, contending for belief in the face of every perplexing thing. The difficulty, therefore, which presents itself to one in my position is to make a selection from the wealth of materials.

It would be an easy and pleasant exercise for me to bring together passages from Browning—first and last, which literally stagger with the joy and fulness of faith, passages which, like the soul of Caponsacchi, are "drunk with truth." I wish, however, to avoid that. For one thing, the pith of any quotation from a serious writer lies in the context. This is notably true of Robert Browning. In his case, it is the process that is characteristic and illumines. He says his best things by the way. But further, it brings little help to one who is really in trouble about faith to hear a firm voice from afar. Such an one is not yet ready for victorious words or for conclusions. He knows

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that, for himself, he has a battle to fight. Caught in a morass it may only dishearten him to hear another celebrate the firm footing on the ridge. What most people need to-day who are wrestling in any fundamental way with life, is some idea which will make the hardest battle seem worth while, an access of energy which will urge them to be faithful to their own personal problem, a revival and reinforcement of that instinct to live, which for reasons has been bruised. In short, they do not want a conclusion but a task.

I have decided to devote myself in what follows of this chapter to one work which represents very fairly Browning's chief positions and his general attitude towards unbelief. Students of the poet know that I might, for this purpose, have chosen "Paracelsus" or "Christmas Eve and Easter Day," or "A Death in the Desert," or "Ferishtah's Fancies," and made any one of these a basis of a defence of faith. I

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have chosen the argument in "Bishop Blougram's Apology." There may be those who know Browning and who think that "Bishop Blougram's Apology" was not meant to be taken seriously, that the Bishop who is speaking is a contemptible character, and that the whole poem is a cynical defence of compromise and hypocrisy. I must simply say that I take an entirely different view. I hold that in "Blougram," Browning is in terrible earnest, despite the humour which never forsook him. In "Blougram," I see Browning refusing to take a man more seriously than the man takes himself. He chaffs Mr Gigadibs, not for his unbelief, but for his shallowness, for his ignorance of what his denial involved. But behind those twinkling eyes of Blougram, I see a convinced and genuine soul. In "Blougram's Apology," Browning utters sentiments which he repeats, almost without change, in what is admitted to be his most sober work, *e.g.* in the "Pope," and in "Ferishtah." Are there

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not, too, sudden solemnities in Blougram's talk, such as are possible only to a man who is in the habit, when he is alone, of facing the ultimate things—God, the soul, the future? Blougram knew very well what he had to look for from God if he were nothing but a hypocrite. You remember the grim story with which he begins his defence.

> " . . . how some actor on a stage played *Death*,
> With pasteboard crown, sham orb, and tinsell'd dart,
> And called himself the monarch of the world;
> Then, going in the tire-room afterward,
> Because the play was done, to shift himself,
> Got touched upon the sleeve familiarly
> The moment he had shut the closet door,
> By Death Himself. Thus God might touch a Pope
> At unawares, ask what his baubles mean,
> And whose part he presumed to play just now.
> Best be yourself, imperial, plain and true."
>
> (*Blougram*, 240, I.)

I cannot think that the man who was haunted at the moment by such a terrible thought,

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sat down there and then deliberately to play the knave. Therefore, and for many reasons in addition, I believe "Bishop Blougram's Apology" to be—though the pure gold, as was Browning's manner, is here mixed with much alloy—a serious defence of faith, a serious statement of the case for belief; that in "Blougram" we have in germ the deepest thoughts that Browning ever uttered.

Mr Gigadibs, a literary man and a sceptic, is seated at table with Bishop Blougram in the Bishop's house. The moment supper is over, the Bishop plunges into a discussion on matters of faith. He may have been irritated by some magazine article of Gigadibs. Certainly he is very angry, but restrains himself, knowing that he has his man well in hand, and can crush him whenever he cares to. He begins: "So, Mr Gigadibs, you would reconstruct the world? You are not satisfied with things as they are? You see flaws and inconveniences which might have

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been prevented. Life puts cruel burdens upon a man — and so forth. In short, things might have been otherwise arranged. No doubt that is quite true; at least let us say so for a moment. One could conceive a world much different from this one, and at first sight, more kind. We might have had less snow about the poles. The Arctic regions are perhaps a little overdone. And then the torrid zone—how hot and intolerable it is! Then there is the loathsome world of creeping things, all so objectionable and, as it seems, so useless! Yes; truly, life might have been laid out upon a different plan. And yet, are you sure it would have been a better world? You cannot say. The Arctic regions, after all, give us our cool fresh winds, and how welcome they are in June! It may be the same with all those other circumstances which we think unfortunate or evil. We cannot now conceive of life without them. If you change one real fact in this world, you must make the whole

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world, and make man, anew. We have grown up amongst things as they are, and now they are the best surroundings we could have. They make the very demands upon us which we need if we are to realise our true life. We need hard facts if we are to have brave souls. No, friend, I see now that you would need to know everything, and know how one thing affected another right on to the limits of creation, before you could say that things as they are, might, with advantage, have been otherwise. But apart from that, the question is not how we should think and feel if we were in another kind of world; if we lived in Mars or in the Moon. The fact is, we are here.

"The common problem, yours—mine, every one's
Is—not to fancy what were fair in life,
Provided it could be—but finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means; a very different thing."

"An illustration. We mortals must cross

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the ocean of this life. We cannot choose but cross. We are already out upon the deep when we are born. To each of us is allotted a certain space in the great ship—no more. How then are we to prepare for the voyage? An India-screen, a piano, some sets of books, a marble bath, some pictures and other comforts? But you have only six feet square! What will you do? Will you stand sulking on the pier and refuse to go on board with some well-selected and well-packed necessaries, because you cannot have your piano and bath? It looks distinguished, no doubt, to protest against what others are trying to make the most of. Nevertheless you must get on board, and if you will not be sensible and take some things you are sure to need, you will have to endure the long voyage in torment. You see what I'm driving at? You and I were not consulted at the making of the world. We awoke and found ourselves here; but we know some plain things which we must do.

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We begin our existence here under the shadow and influence of instincts which were given to us, as it were, in our sleep."

"And now" (we may suppose Blougram continuing as he warmed to his case) "we are agreed that we must take the world as we find it. We are not in Mars or in the Moon, we are here. The question is—Shall we believe in God or shall we not believe? *You* do *not* believe. Well, let me also try not to believe. Let us banish belief entirely —not half-heartedly, mind you, or in certain special cases, but absolutely."

Here, let me say, we are coming to a stroke which Browning practises very frequently. It is a playful stroke, as he performed it, but deadly always at the last. He accepts his opponent's position, and then shows him that it is untenable. Browning, as Father Ogniben in "A Soul's Tragedy" puts it, tries to help a man on to his own conclusions. "I have no objection," said that guileless and nimble father, "to agreeing with any man that two

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and two make *five*, if he will go a little further and agree with me that four and four make *ten*." And so, Browning never pursues an opponent so ruthlessly as when he begins by agreeing with him, and then showing him what both have committed themselves to. Another stroke of his, and one very like this, is to answer a man's question by asking him another; but we have reached an example of both.

"Let us together," continued Blougram, "banish belief and refuse to see even one solitary hint of God in the world, or in history, or in the spirit of man. Let us agree that the world is so much stone and lime, and that things happen without reason or meaning. But can you promise me that you and I shall be able to keep ourselves in this fixed state of unbelief? I, on my part, am quite ready to confess that there are circumstances in life, such as the existence of evil, the apparent drowsiness of justice and absence of retribution, pain, sickness, and the moral

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squalor, which disturb my faith in God, and pull me up suddenly. But, if we decide not to believe, can you promise me that our *unbelief* will never be disturbed, that we shall never be pulled up suddenly in our *atheism* by something which suggests—God? Ah! you cannot promise me that I shall be safe in my unbelief. Suppose I stand, some evening, by the sea-shore alone. I watch the rise and fall of the vast waters, until I seem to see the heaving bosom of a tired world asleep. The sun goes down behind the sea, and in the dusky sky the quiet stars begin to be born. Ah, Gigadibs, can you promise me that I shall *not* feel the pathos of such a scene, that I shall not drift away into thinking of God and of myself? No, you cannot promise me that. For I am so made that I cannot but feel strange meanings amid such solemn scenes, and hear again the siren voice of faith,—that this world which we hold to be crass matter, and without divinity, is none other than the house of God, and the gate

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of heaven. Can you promise me that I shall never hear one speaking to me, when I am alone, recalling to me my past foolishness and the things I would fain forget? Confess that you cannot, confess that the soul lies open for ever to all manner of disquieting and convulsive thoughts, that

"Just when we're safest, there's a sunset touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides—
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring
Round the ancient Idol, on his base again,
The grand Perhaps! We look on helplessly.
There the Old misgivings, crooked questions are—
This good God—what He could do if He would,
Would if He could—then must have done long since.
If so, when, where, and how? Some way must be,—

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Once feel about and soon or late you hit
Some sense in which it might be after all,
Why not, "THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE?"

Thus, you see, unbelief is not more secure than belief. Admit that in the human situation, there are circumstances which seem to urge you to unbelief, there are also circumstances which assuredly urge you to belief. When I set out with my belief, I agree with you for the moment that my belief may get many a shake as I pass through life and look about me. But when you set out with *your unbelief*, you must agree with me that *your unbelief* also gets many a shake; so that, in short, you are no more secure in your unbelief than I am in my belief.

"All that we have gained by our unbelief,
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
For one of faith diversified by doubt.
We called the chess-board white; we call it black."

Having made good this point, Blougram,

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we may suppose, was silent awaiting an answer from the other. Students of philosophy will recall—when I mention it—a remarkable corroboration of what Browning, by the mouth of Blougram, has just said, that a man's theory of life may be overturned and shown to be inadequate by some new experience in the man's own life; how the human heart may refuse to be treated as a negligible thing, but may start up and claim its share. They will remember how Auguste Comte had completed his "Positive Philosophy"—a system which assumed that man is guided and ought to be guided by the chill voice of reason and exact knowledge; and how he fell in love with Madame Clotilde de Vaux, and thereupon revised his system, leaving room for the human heart. Truly, as Blougram says—

"Just when we are safest there's a sunset touch

.

And that's enough. . . ."

Gigadibs has his reply, and it is the reply

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of many. "You agree with me," he says, "that the facts of human life may lead to unbelief as naturally as to belief. Unbelief, therefore, is at least quite as proper an attitude for a man to take up as belief?" "No!" Blougram breaks in triumphantly, "I have you there. You forget that we *must embark* on the sea of life. We must work hard and bear burdens. Supposing the reasons *for* belief and against it were equal (they are not), a man must choose the one which makes the best of him. Now, I hold that belief does this; unbelief, not at all." Belief means for him who has it, that life, and his particular life, has a purpose which embraces and needs all the peculiar events, trials, lights, shadows which come to him. If a man truly believes, he will march breast-forward as to a land of promise. With belief in his heart, the details of his life lose all their pettiness and acquire dignity; his sorrows and pains are no longer torture, but discipline, and they point onwards to a

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day and to a state of being when there shall be no more need of them. Whereas unbelief—how does it bear upon life? Why should a man who denies God go on toiling and moiling here? If a man is living to no purpose, why should he go on living at all? Why has he not the courage to make plain to himself what thorough unbelief means? It means that he is living, as Emerson put it,—simply to wear out his boots. No! unbelief should always be accompanied by *inaction*, and should welcome and indeed hasten towards death. If a man thoroughly denies that there is any purpose, or use, or final meaning in this human scene, if he sincerely holds that there is no *reason* for his doing anything, then, says Blougram with a slash, "to be consistent he should keep in bed."

A man's *belief* is the thing the man is *living by*. Beneath every life, there is consciously or unconsciously, a personal belief. "And now, if we are agreed that life needs

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belief, we must hold to that as a fixed dogma in all weathers. We must apply it to the minutest as well as to the vastest issues. We must not only believe when we are inclined to; we must determine to believe. We must rebuke ourselves as often as we find ourselves cynical or unbelieving. We must say, this is my infirmity, my weakness, the result of moral indolence, anything; but it is not the truth. It may be that there is a mist in my eyes, or that there are clouds overhead; but it can never be that there is no eternal blue and eternal sun. Once have I felt the awful need of God, and in that moment I seemed to find Him. I must believe forever that He is.

Further, if we must believe at all, we must believe *the best.* If there is a purpose running through all things, it can only be the holiest purpose. If God is, He must be good beyond all our measures of goodness. If man is indeed going home, then eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither

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hath it entered the mind of man, the glorious things that wait to welcome him."

If I am right in what I read between the lines, Blougram by this time had made a real impression on behalf of belief in the mind of the sceptic. Gigadibs seems to have said, "Yes, I see now that belief is necessary if a man is ever to do his part in life. But why is faith not easier? Why cannot we see the signs of God more unmistakably? If one could only see some amazing and undeniable proof, how much more easy faith would be?" "Not so!" says Blougram, "in that case it would not be faith; it would be sight. Besides, you know not what you ask. As surely as a man's body would shrivel up in agony if his eyes were without lids and his brain were without a pan and the vertical sun were beating upon him, so surely would the mind faint and lose its own identity if suddenly a man were brought face to face with God. 'That were the seeing God,

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no flesh shall dare.' You think you would like to have lived in the Middle Ages, when everybody believed—when a traveller coming home from the East would tell you how he had seen the ark lying on the shoulder of Mt. Ararat, though he did not go to the top of the mountain as it was getting dark and there were robbers about. You think faith would have been easier then. Once more, not so; at least not so, the faith I mean. For faith with me is not the easy acceptance of hearsays. Faith is the vivid control by God of my whole life, body, soul and spirit, and such a state is hard to attain and to keep alike in every age.

" ' Friend, such view
Is but man's wonderful and wide mistake.
Man lumps his kind i' the wars: God singles thence
Unit by unit. Thou and God exist—
So think—for certain: think the mass—mankind—
Disparts, disperses, leaves thyself alone!
Ask thy lone soul what laws are plain to thee,
Thee and no other—stand or fall by them!

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That is the part for thee: regard all else
For what it may be—Time's illusion. . . .'"
(*Ferishtah, A Camel Driver.*)

"'What think ye of Christ, friend, when all's done and said?
Like you this Christianity or not?
It may be false, but would you have it true?
Has it *your* vote to be so if it can?
.
Once own the use of faith, I'll find your faith:
We're back on Christian ground.'"
(*Blougram.*)

Such, in very bare outline, and stripped of innumerable gems of truth that thrust and shine and burn, is Bishop Blougram's Apology, his statement of "the Case for Belief." We read that the sceptic, to whom he addressed all this and more, was, if not convinced, at least made sober; that he wrote no more articles against faith; that he began to be less sure of his own ground, like a man who is standing on thin ice. He went abroad, where, Browning hopes,

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amongst the quiet and solemn things of nature he may study the last chapter of S. John, and learn how even one who, like Peter, had blasphemed, may come to himself and live and die for the Lord whom once he denied.

I do not know whether I have helped any of you in anything I have written. I wanted to leave certain things on your minds. I wanted, for one thing, to show that the thorough-going denial of God has its own serious difficulties, and that these are more obstinate than the difficulties of believing. I wanted also to help anyone who had taken up a definite position of denial (to help him) to carry his unbelief to some of its conclusions; in short, to point out that if two and two are to count five, four and four must be allowed to count ten; which is more serious.

But I have been wishing in all that I have said to remove an impression which seems to

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be common. There are many who think that belief is an easy thing to attain to, and to hold. I think, on the contrary, that unbelief is the easy thing, the thing that requires no thought at all, or only surface thought. S. Paul has a deep saying to this effect. "No man," he affirms, "can say that Jesus is the Lord except by the Holy Ghost." S. Paul's Master said, "The pure in heart shall see God." These two sayings express one and the same thought. It is this; the vision of God falls only upon those who believe in the soul, only upon those who treat life seriously, and who obey at every step the highest that they know.

If an artist fifty years ago had wished to paint a figure which expressed the ideas underlying the word "belief," he would have drawn the figure of a *man*, armed most likely to the teeth, his enemies struggling about his feet, and in the distance, but not too far ahead, the sure gates of the Heavenly City.

But how does an artist of our day, who

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has heard the voices of our time, symbolise the great ideas which we name when we say "I believe in God."

Take Watts' fine picture, called "Hope." It is the figure of a *woman*, sitting on the circle of the earth. She is blindfolded. She holds a stringed instrument to her ear. She has struck one chord and it has broken at her touch; she has struck another, and it too has given way. And now there is but one string remaining. From it must the music come—else there is no music in the world. But she does not shrink before the awful possibility. She prepares to strike once more, never doubting that the last string will be true, and from it will come forth the clear, full note. That is faith: "to be very sure of God."

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The Soul's Leap to God

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II

The Soul's Leap to God

I READ in the newspaper the other day of a wonderful invention to be used in war. It was a *bomb*, with such materials inside the shell, and so contrived as to explode at the touch *of a ray of light!* The bomb might be placed anywhere and do no harm; but let a ray of light fall upon it in particular, and on the instant, at the summons of the light, the thing would awake and burst. Well, that is a very exact summary of Robert Browning's teaching on the conversion of the soul, or the soul's discovery of God. His books teem with lines which tell of the tremendous forces that lie coiled up within the soul, ready to burst out and tear open a way of escape for that divine thing which, according to Browning, is the last analysis of

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a man. He loves to watch these explosions; to show you a light coming towards a man until it shines upon his face. Suddenly there is blaze and crash and dust and smoke; but when these have passed, you see the man sitting at the feet of God, "Clothed and in his right mind," while Browning chants a psalm. Browning makes these bombs of every degree of intensity. He is always indeed practising with this principle of his, that light can burst every bondage of the soul. He loads one man's soul with some small secret, some light sin, but still a secret and a sin; something that gnaws within him and brings clouds into his sky. Then he will turn a gentle light upon that man's face, which shakes the man but sets him free. Again, he will put more of the explosive material into a soul, deeper and more obstinate sinning, and within a harder shell. Once more, he will turn the ray of light, the mild eye of God, upon the man, and then you have a crash and a cry; but this man

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too comes out of the fire free and clean. At last he will construct a hideous soul as a final test for his theory and faith. He will load this soul to the neck with the stuff of hell; he will bind it round and round with bands of steel. As you look at the impenetrable case in which this foulness is sealed, with no chink or weakness in its brazenness, you wonder whether the quiet light will ever reach and stir that blackness into flame. The Great Chemist—the poet himself—seems to doubt. But once more he turns a light upon the black ball, until it glows. For one moment there is silence. And for another! The light seems to call in vain. But it still beats upon the encased iniquity, growing whiter with impatience, until the iron wrappings grow hot and the mass bursts like all the others, and Guido, the infernal, rushes out of life with a cry which the good God may hear.

I regard Browning's teaching on Conversion as his supreme message to our time. It

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is that teaching, as it seems to me, which ranks him with the prophets. Valuable as is the light which he sheds upon those problems of life and experience which are as old as man, or at least, as old as the days of reflection; splendid as is the courage with which he girds his loins, and faces the darkness and the doubt; yet more solitary and distinguished is his teaching on the soul of man, his impassioned confidence that the soul may, in one grand moment, leap sheer out of any depth of shame or subtle bondage, and leap to the breast of God.

We do not go far wrong if we define a prophet as a man who, in the name of God, boldly contradicts the spirit of his time. A man who knows very well what people are saying, and how they have reached their conclusions, but who himself has a hold of the great fact of God, which, for him, makes all things different—that is, often, how we become aware that there is a prophet in our midst. Well; in these days of ours, we have become

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conscious of certain words which, unless we take care to keep them in subjection, will shut out God and hope. There is the word "heredity," for we always had the thing itself. We have learned now that we all begin life with a bias, that we are not free, but bound. We are the children of our parents; we inherit their form and features, their voice and manner. Aye, but more than that, we inherit their history and, in a very real sense, we in our life merely continue theirs. There is no reason to suppose that the likeness is confined to externals merely. If thought, and feeling and desire, and the will itself are bound up inextricably with our physical frame, then—so materialistic science must go on to affirm—even in the region of our most personal life, we must be content to dwell under the shadow and bondage of the past, under the tyranny and threatening of old deeds and passions and weaknesses which were never properly our own. And further, we have become vividly aware in

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these days of the law that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," we see now very clearly that this is a law-abiding world, and that consequences are inevitable. That having once admitted a sin into our life, thereafter "the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." That therefore there is nothing left for us except to "dree our weird," to fulfil our destiny, which in fact is our doom. And so on and on! Now, it is the distinction of Robert Browning that he breaks in upon this gloomy teaching and cries out a thousand times, that it is false and worse—a blasphemy. It is quite true, but it is not the whole truth—for it omits God. It is true that the moral life is continuous and inevitable, and that as a man has begun, so he must go on. But it is also true—and this overcomes the other, as a tide will overcome the wind and compel the waters its way, (it is also true), that there is a living God who is ever pressing in upon us with His hidden resources to interrupt and turn

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the fatal drift. It was Robert Browning's great opportunity and genius to declare this Gospel, which is just *the* Gospel, to our time; to tell out by word and parable, that, in spite of the increment of generations bearing down upon one's soul, in spite of inherited weakness and liabilities, in spite of the burdens which the soul may have taken upon itself, and the entanglements in the midst of which it may now be writhing — it was his to declare that it is possible for the soul to meet the light, to see, as it were, the face of God, and then would the hoariest mountains be removed and cast into the depths of the sea.

" Oh, we're sunk enough here God knows!
But not quite so sunk that moments
Sure tho' seldom are denied us,
When the spirit's true endowments
Stand out plainly from its false ones,
And apprise it, if pursuing
Or the right way, or the wrong way
To its triumph or undoing.

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There are flashes struck from midnights,
There are fire-flames noon-days kindle,
Whereby piled-up honours perish,
Whereby swollen ambitions dwindle.
While just this or that poor impulse,
Which for once had play unstifled,
Seems the whole work of a life-time,
That away the rest have trifled."

There, in those lines from "Cristina," you have one expression among a thousand of Browning's exultant belief in what the Church calls Conversion. In those lines, at the same time, you have the manner in which, according to the poet, the great change invariably happens. Suddenly a light falls upon a man, some message from the pure world of spirit strays into his soul, and in that moment the world shakes beneath him. He sees himself, his sin, his shame, his awful peril in one amazing flash, and by the compulsion of a power which he cannot resist, he breaks away from it all. The past falls from him so thoroughly that the man can look at it now as if it were some horrid

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snake which had twined itself about him, and which now lies dead at his feet. The ray of light has burst the fetters of brass, and scattered the iron in pieces. The man stands breathless as if from a struggle, but stands for the moment free and clean, a soul new-born and made alive unto God. Browning never wearies telling us of the power of splendid moments to lift a man sheer out of his sin or weakness or unbelief.

> " I crossed a moor with a name of its own,
> And a certain use in the world no doubt;
> Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
> 'Mid the blank miles round about;
>
> " For there I picked up on the heather,
> And there I put inside my breast
> A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!
> Well, I forget the rest."

A moulted, eagle feather! Something, *i.e.* falls out of the blue sky at a man's feet, as he goes on through life. Well, let him put it inside his breast. For moments like these decide our destiny. These, the

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" Shifting fancies and celestial lights
With all the grand orchestral silences
To keep the pauses of the rhythmic sounds,"

—these are the only moments worth treasuring. They make us forget all that is best forgotten. They lift us far above the common ways, and give us glimpses of a vast, fair world which ever abides, though for long days we often see it not.

" In man's self arise,
August anticipations, symbols, types,
Of a dim splendour, ever on before,
In that eternal circle run by life."

Those moments of illumination, when a light from another place, like the finger of God, touches the soul, may spring from every kind of circumstance. They are possible at all, indeed, because there is an ultimate sympathy between God and every man. But any kind of incident, if it only happen at the right moment, may become the medium of a whisper from God which stirs and unmakes

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and remakes the soul. "The wind bloweth where it listeth," said Jesus, "and thou hearest the sound thereof; but canst not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth, so is every one that is born of the Spirit." It may be the discovery that you love someone, or that someone loves you—it may be this that lifts you out of yourself and introduces you in the moment, and for ever to the spiritual life. It may be the passing of a sweet, sad face. It may be a white flower. It may be a chord of music or an old song heard by you after long sore years. It may be that someone has forgiven you a cruel wrong. Or it may come to you—the quiet ray of light, the glance of God's calm eye—it may come in the pause of sickness, or in the keen solitude before death. Anything may serve to let in the holy, purging fire of God and truth, and thus make all things new.

"I was a friend in darkness chained for ever
Within some ocean-cave; and ages rolled

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Till through the cleft rock, like a moonbeam, came
A white swan to remain with me: and ages
Rolled, yet I tired not of my first free joy
In gazing on the peace of its pure wings."

Even a dream may convey a true message to the soul, and the man may, when he awakes, thank God for the vision, and live by the light of it for ever.

"One dream came to a pale poet's sleep,
And he said, 'I am singled out by God;
No sin must touch me.'"

But whatever the occasion through which this breath of God finds its way into the soul, the thing itself has always one quality. It is always "a moulted feather, an eagle feather," always something from an unworldly place, something that falls out of the sky, something that comes out of a pure world, which seems to bend over and embrace this world of ours. In fact, it is always the whisper of God Himself. "For God is in all, and through all, and over all." The human

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love, the sweet, sad face, the chord of music, the snatch of the old song, were only, so to speak, the messengers who knocked at the heart of the man; when the door opened, it was always God Himself who entered. There is a fine passage[1] in "Paracelsus," where Browning tries to account for this fact which he saw on every side, that the soul, at the touch of a certain light, can shake itself free and break away from its bondage as an imprisoned eagle might escape and sweep the heavens in sheer defiance.

"Truth is within ourselves: it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe;
There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fulness; and around,
Wall upon wall the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth,
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
Binds it, and makes all error: and to KNOW
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape.
.

[1] Vol. ii., p. 34.

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Hence may not truth be lodged alike in all
The lowest as the highest? Some slight film
The interposing bar which binds a soul
And makes the idiot; just as makes the sage
Some film removed, the happy outlet whence
Truth issues proudly?
Oh, not alone when life flows still do truth
And power emerge, but also when strange chance
Ruffles its current; in unused conjuncture
When sickness breaks the body—hunger, watching,
Excess or languor, oftenest death's approach,
Peril, deep joy, or woe.
Therefore set free the soul alike in all."

The substance of such teaching is just this: man is made in the image of God, and is made for God. Any other kind of life does violence to a man, and is unnatural to him. If a man wanders from his way, if he forgets what he is, then it is as if he was *compressing* the divine spirit within him. That is why sin brings pain, and why the ways of transgressors are hard. It is because the spirit of God is resisting the pressure, the true

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man is struggling to dethrone the false man. When through some chink or momentary pause, the spirit within sees the face of God, when the hand of God reaches and grasps the hand of the man within, then there comes such a reinforcement to the soul that it can throw off the incubus of years and the misery of countless deeds, and can stand erect above all the ruins. "When he came to himself, he said I will arise and go to my Father. And he arose and came to his Father." Man is for ever the prodigal son, with his history and his hope.

And now, let me give you some illustrations of Browning's teaching on Conversion, which up to this point I have been trying to isolate and to define. The locus classicus for this side of his message is, as students of Browning are aware, the drama entitled "Pippa Passes"—a work which for delicacy and charm, and, at the same time for strength and insight, Browning surely never surpassed. There you have the story of how a little

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orphan girl, Pippa, spent her one holiday. She set out in the early morning of the New Year's Day, with no aim except to walk in the sunshine and sing out the joy she felt. But all the while, she was to be God's own sunshine that day, looking in upon certain lives, interrupting them, rebuking them, inspiring them, but bringing them one and all face to face with God.

First she passed the unholy house of Ottima and her lover Sebald. Already Sebald's conscience had been aroused, as he saw the sun rising grandly that morning over the fresh good world. But his temptation was too near him. The good spirit which for a moment had been stirred, was just about to fall into a deeper sleep, and Sebald to fling himself into the abyss of sin, when *Pippa passed*, singing, singing about God.

"The year's at the spring, and day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven; the hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing, the snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven; all's right with the world."

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And Pippa passed. Aye: but not before a shaft of light had pierced as with an arrow the inmost soul of Sebald. "God's in His heaven!" he muttered, like one awakening from a horrid dream. "God's in His heaven! Do you hear that, Ottima?" And in the moment the world of sin appeared in all its ghastliness. Suddenly, sin lost all its glamour for him, and in that pure moment of recoil, he killed himself. But before he died a wonderful peace seemed to be coming towards him. He thanked God that he had been saved so as by fire.

> "That little peasant's voice
> Has righted all again; though I be lost,
> I know which is the better, never fear,
> Of vice or virtue, purity or lust,
> Nature or trick! I see what I have done,
> Entirely now. Oh, I am proud to feel,
> Such torments — let the world take credit thence—
> I, having done my deed, pay now its price,
> . . . God's in His heaven!"

His last words were that he felt all the sin

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and blackness of his life hurrying down, like waters, into some ghastly pit, leaving him clean and calm.

I will not stay to tell you now of the other ministries which little Pippa—God's ray of light—rendered on that New Year's Day. How she passed by Jules, the artist's window, when his soul was in another kind of toil, when he was nearly giving way to the spirit of the world; and how her song came to his rescue and was for him the voice of God bidding him "to his own self be true." And then, how she passed by the old tower where Luigi the patriot had almost consented to give up the enterprise which was to set Italy free. But Pippa's song made him dash to the earth the cup that would have sent his soul to sleep, and he hurried down the hill to his high task. "'Tis God's voice calls: how could I stay? Farewell!" And last, and late at night, how Pippa passed beneath the bishop's window just as the bishop was being lured into a diabolical

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plot. But the bishop heard the innocent song, and in a moment shrank shuddering from the abyss where last moment he stood trifling with his soul. "Gag this villain who tempts me. Remove him! O Lord, have mercy upon me!" Thus in one day, the little child, Pippa, became in God's hand, a ray of light which burst the bondage of four souls at least.

Take another story, in which you find the same account of the burdened soul when a stream of light pours into it. Take the story in the poem "Ned Bratts." On a hot midsummer's day, their lordships were conducting the Special Assizes in Bedford Courthouse. Business was proceeding, when old Ned Bratts and his wife, hand-in-hand, tumbled up the passage until they reached the platform. Then they turned round and faced the assembled people. They pleaded with the judges—in God's name—to let them speak out. And this was what they said. They had just come from Bedford Jail, where they had met John Bunyan.

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They had been such sinners all their lives that their souls were black and hot. But John Bunyan had spoken to them of God. He had taken down "the blessed book" and had read out of it about God, and Christ, and heaven; about Love and Pity and Forgiveness; about another world than this, and another way of looking at things from what is common. And God's eye had settled upon them—man and wife. And now they felt that they must empty their souls of all their sins, and drag out to the light all their hidden iniquities so that God and the daylight might burn them up. In that open court, in the full light of day, they poured out their souls, those two, the one helping the other not to forget even one foul spot. Murders they confessed and all manner of evil, and felt, they said, as they confessed, that they were being eased and were becoming pure. At last they were done; and now they besought the judges to condemn them quick to death.

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And Ned Bratts and his wife passed swiftly out of life singing and making melody in their hearts unto God.

But the illustration of how God and all holy things rush in upon the soul, which I love best in Browning, is the story from the "Ring and the Book" which the priest Caponsacchi tells of himself. In that story, you may learn how a passionate and sinful man became suddenly quiet and gentle and vividly aware of God—all through that angel child, Pompilia—our poet's most delicate and holy work, "the rose he has gathered for the breast of God." You will read there how a careless and wild-hearted man met the pure gaze of an innocent child who had been cruelly wronged, and how from that moment God possessed him utterly. He tells how—

> "That night and next day did the gaze endure,
> Burnt to my brain, as sunbeam thro' shut eyes,
> And not once changed the beautiful, sad, strange smile."

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The Soul's Leap to God

He tells how he wrestled with the new vision of God, and with the new meaning which life had taken on,

"The fact is (he says) I am troubled in my mind,
Beset and pressed hard by some novel thoughts.

I will live alone, one does so in a crowd,
And look into my heart a little."

He tells how he used to struggle with himself before he gave himself entirely to the new leading;

"One evening I was sitting in a muse,
Over the opened 'Summa'; darkened round
By the mid-March twilight, thinking how my life
Had shaken under me—broke short indeed,
And showed me the gap 'twixt what is, what should be,
And into what abysm the soul may slip,"

—when one day she of the angel-face spoke to him and laid a duty on his soul. Then Caponsacchi awoke: the Caponsacchi God was striving to bring forth. He awoke and burst his bands asunder, as all this poet's

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heroes do, as we all do, when the ray of light from God really reaches to our soul. In page after page of the most stirring emotion, emotion which infects you as you read, and makes you long for some great sacrifice which will put you also to the test, and burn up all the dross and lurking meanness of your life; in page after page of burning words he tells his judges—for he is telling his story in a court of law—of the earthquake and avalanche and the fires which unmade and remade his soul:—

> "Pompilia spoke and I at once received,
> Accepted my own fact, my miracle,
> Self-authorised and self-explained—she chose
> To summon me and dignify her choice.
> Afterward . . ."

Listen to the description which follows of a sinful man's past life, as it appears to him after God has lifted him out of it.

> "Afterward—Oh! I gave a passing glance
> To a certain ugly cloud-shape, goblin-shred
> Of hell-smoke hurrying past the splendid moon,

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Out now to tolerate no darkness more;
And saw right thro' the thing that tried to pass
For truth and solid, not an empty lie.

"By the invasion I lay passive to
In rushed new things, the old were swept away;
Alike abolished—the imprisonment
Of the outside air, the inside weight o' the world
That pulled me down. Death meant, to spurn
the ground,
Soar to the sky—die well and you do that.
The very immolation made the bliss;
Death was the heart of life, and all the harm
My folly had crouched to avoid, now proved a
veil,
Hiding all gain my wisdom strove to grasp.

"Into another state, under new rule
I knew myself was passing swift and sure;
Whereof the initiatory pang approached,
Felicitous annoy, as bitter-sweet
As when the virgin-band, the victors chaste
Feel at the end the earthly garments drop,
And rise with something of a rosy shame
Into immortal nakedness: so I
Lay, and let come the proper throe would thrill
Into the ecstasy and outthrob pain."

Caponsacchi stops here in the rush of his

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words as if to excuse himself for his vehemence. You must know, said he, that a man gets drunk with truth, stagnant within him. (Which, by the way, may explain the accusation brought against the disciples after Pentecost, when the long silence and desolation that followed upon Calvary were suddenly broken up by yon mighty rushing wind which shook the house.) Caponsacchi's judges knew, as I hope you who read these words know, that he was not under the inspiration of human love in all this vehemence. No! the revelation of Pompilia's holiness was indeed the key which opened the door of Caponsacchi's heart; but it was God, not Pompilia, who entered.

"You know (he cries) this is not love, Sirs! It is faith,
The feeling that there's God, He reigns and rules,
Out of this low world."

And now, perhaps, you know something

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of what Browning has to say on the subject of Conversion, or how the Fire and Energy of God rush in upon the soul. I must, in any case, pass on to notice some things which follow from this teaching, some principles which Browning strenuously preaches, and which we shall do well to pay heed to. Conversion, he says, begins with the vision of God. This, as we saw, may come in countless ways. A light falls upon a man, and if it really reaches to his soul, and touches the quick, it will break up the most obstinate crust of sin and free the man of every entanglement. Yes; but it is always within the power of a man to be disobedient to the heavenly vision. Browning knew this. Perhaps the most solemn words he writes are on this very matter — when he warns us not to trifle with the high impulses which visit us; not to turn away from any private call from God. That to him is the great Tragedy, when the soul will not be faithful to what it sees. He has a drama entitled

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"A Soul's Tragedy," and this is the subject of it all: how the poetry sank into prose in one particular case; how the light that was in a man became darkness. It is not Browning's fault if men slip away from their own high moments, for he has warned them. In such a poem as "The Statue and the Bust," he appeals to men to be immediate and thorough in obedience to their solitary sense of duty. And again and again, in tingling words, he bids us count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of God.

> "Are there not, Festus, are there not, dear Michal,
> Two points in the adventure of the diver—
> One when— a beggar—he prepares to plunge?
> One when—a prince—he rises with his pearl?"

In such a poem as "The Lost Leader" he pours out his pity and contempt for those who "just for a handful of silver," or "just for a riband to stick in their coat," forsake their high calling, and "sink to the rear and the slaves." It is like S. Paul's short,

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sad saying: "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world." The Pope, in "The Ring and the Book," says this fills him with despair—when men come down to the sea-shore, and you say, "Come and I will show you where you may find pearls," but they go their own way, muttering "Pearls! We are not wanting pearls; we are dredging for whelks."

Browning is very well aware, too, what are the considerations which usually hinder men from rising at the blast of the trumpet and going on in strict obedience to God. He knows the snare of the world, the fear of its reproach or laughter, the shrinking on the part of men from clear and decisive acts of individuality. He knows, too, how a man who has once tasted the good gift of God in the form of a call or illumination, a man who has felt the power of the world to come, may fall away. He knows, *e.g.* how a man may persuade himself that he need not enter into life by the strait gate, but

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may get to the same end by going on as he is. Browning knows all the tricks that a man will play upon himself rather than strike his tent and go out like Abraham, not knowing whither, but only that God has bidden him. You must read for yourselves that delightful bantering with which Father Ogniben, in "A Soul's Tragedy," pours contempt upon Chiappino, who had become too comfortable to remain the reformer he once was.

Chiappino, since he had got on in the world (to use the phrase), had changed his views wofully, and, in spite of himself, was somewhat uneasy. "Naturally," says he, trying to reassure himself, "time wears off asperities. We come to see points of sympathy between ourselves and those whom we have been accustomed to look upon as enemies." "Aye," says Ogniben, "had the young David but sat first to dine on his cheeses with the Philistine, he had soon discovered abundance of such common sym-

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pathies. He of Gath, it is recorded, was born of a father and mother, had brothers and sisters like another man—they, no more than the sons of Jesse, were used to eat each other. But for the sake of one broad antipathy that had existed from the beginning, David slung the stone, cut off the giant's head, made a spoil of it, and after, ate his cheeses alone, with the better appetite, for all I can learn."

On the whole, however, Browning has more pity than anger for those who let pass the fine moments in which God is calling them, and everything is possible. He is full of sorrow for those bright mornings which sink into commonplace and grey-skied afternoons. Such is the spirit of the poem (to name but one) called "A Toccata of Galuppi's." We feel the poet's great sorrow, mixed with the feeling that it was their fate, that while Galuppi should be playing his fine music, which seemed to move amongst the great mysteries and responsi-

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bilities, the gay company were fooling away their souls, dancing on the edge of the abyss.

Browning is forced to face the question as to what becomes of those who, in the language of "Hebrews," "were once enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and have felt the powers of the world to come," and who have meanwhile fallen away. Here and there, in the long course of his teaching, Browning faces this question with the gravity and sense of the issues which it deserves. His general answer is that "there shall never be one lost good." Those visions, and lights, those tastings of the Holy Ghost, which have visited a life, cannot surely altogether die. They may be stirred into life and power again. Sometimes it is only when a man lies in a fever or has gone mad, and only from his ravings, that you learn what a man he was. The inmost deposit of his

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mind and heart becomes exposed. So life may reduce a man to an extremity in which the world may lose its hold upon him, and the pure vision which once blessed him for a day may resume its sway for ever.

Towards the close of the Pope's musings in "The Ring and the Book," we find Browning's most deliberate judgment upon this solemn matter. Guido, surely the most abandoned character ever drawn, is just about to be condemned, and the Pope, who is to pass sentence upon him, falls into some speculations as to what is likely to become of Guido hereafter. He knows that in this region nothing is absolutely certain, but he has a hope. It is this. Once upon a time, he says, he was in Naples. It was the darkest of nights. He seemed to be standing in the midst of black and empty space. Suddenly a flash of lightning lit up the sky, and the city stood out plainly—the cathedral, and "white, like a shroud," the sea. Next moment all was black again. In

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the same way (he closes) it is possible, it is his faint hope, that sudden death may flash the truth for one instant into Guido's soul, and Guido may see God for one moment and be saved.

> " Else I avert my face, nor follow him
> Into that sad, obscure, sequestered state
> Where God unmakes but to remake the soul,
> He else made first in vain ; which must not be."

In the well-known poem " Saul," Browning tells in his own way the story from 1 Samuel. How David played the harp before Saul who was mad—played and played until "Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him." He tells how David's music kept calling to Saul the man, away beneath and behind Saul, the mistake and the failure. How David sang and played of other days, of better days, of the days when there was no goodlier man in Israel than Saul, for, from his shoulders and

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upwards he was higher than any man in Israel. And how, under all the playing, God was speaking to the soul of Saul, "alluring him into a quiet place, and speaking comfortably to him, and giving him the valley of Achor, for a door of hope, that he might rejoice there as in the days of his youth." Just so, the poet goes on to say, God is ever playing to the spirit of man through all the ages, ever speaking to his child beneath all the wildness and the madness and disgrace which have gathered about him in his long absence from Home. God is ever speaking, singing, playing, satisfying, troubling, piercing, healing his soul, if by any means the evil spirit may at length depart. And here lies Browning's hope for the world, right on until the end of the days. Jesus Christ, God's one harmonious Son, is now in this world of ours for ever. He is one of the great facts of History. He can never, never be unseated now. And all through the ages, as it hath been it shall be

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—wearied men and women, all who are perplexed, beaten, overborne by the stress of evil fortune, or by the tumult and bitterness of their own hearts, or by the mystery and insecurity of our present state of being, all these, *i.e.* all living souls, will one by one in some day or hour of their anguish or solitude, remember Jesus and think of Him, and as they think, that pure ray of light, that mild eye of God, will fall steadily upon them, and will overturn and overturn until He comes, whose right it is to occupy the whole mind of man.

Note:—"I don't see any way out of the up-and-down existence which you describe. I feel more and more the horrible contrast between rare moments and my average level of achievement. I know that it is only a man's self that realises this; to the outsider you look much of a piece. I do believe that the moments are the things that give one what is best, and that they don't really pass, however much one may fall away from them. In the greater part of life it seems as if one must consent; but the naked touch of reality, when it

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does come, is like flame through the veins, and each time it comes it leaves the blood running a little quicker."—From Nettleship's "Philosophical Lectures and Remains."

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The Mystery of Evil

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III

"The Mystery of Evil"

THERE is one pregnant line of Browning's—it is in "Old Pictures in Florence"—which, when we think steadily over it, seems to gather into itself all that he ever had to say concerning the problems which we find in human existence the moment we begin to reflect. I mean the line—"'Tis looking downward that makes one dizzy." It is, he would say, when we keep our eyes upon the bare facts of life without the light and reinforcement of faith; it is when we forget the high end towards which all things *may* be moving, towards which therefore they *must* be moving—since, according to Browning, what *may* be *will* be, and the best is just that which shall happen; it is when we forget all this, when we turn our eyes away from the sky and the sun, when we

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suspect (instead of trusting) the song and the dream, that the circumstances of the human lot seem harsh and dreary and desperate. But, what if God be! If all life is a journey and a process! If life, with all its "shade and shine," means something grand and sure! If there remaineth a Rest to the people of God, a crown to each strenuous soul,

> " Then welcome each rebuff
> That turns earth's smoothness rough,
> Each sting that bids nor sit, nor stand, but go!
> Be our joys three-parts pain!
> Strive and hold cheap the strain!
> Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge
> the throe."

'Tis looking downward only that makes one dizzy. Only to those who omit God and refuse the instinct of hope, can life appear ghastly or contemptuous of man. But,

> " How soon a smile of God can change the world!
> How we are made for happiness—how work
> Grows play, adversity a winning fight."

In our time, we have become very conscious of the dark things that are to be found in

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life—"the things hard to understand." It need not be that we of to-day are more sensitive than were our fathers to the vast amount of suffering that there is in the world, or more ready to be at pains and inconveniences for its removal. But certainly we speak more easily than they did of such things—of the hardness of life, of the pain, the poverty and the seeming injustice. It is not too much to say that we are more constantly aware of the problem of human existence than of its solution. We find ourselves speaking of "the grimness of the general human situation," and we fasten on a phrase like "the pathos of life," and make much of it—it sounds so true and real. Reasons might be given why this mood has overtaken us who belong to this particular time. For one thing, we have just come into an enormous wealth of knowledge. Astronomy, geology, palæontology—to name but a few of the ways in which we have become conscious of the vast spaces that

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surround us—these have awakened man to such a sense of the infinite that he is still somewhat overwhelmed. He has not yet found courage to feel and to say that all this vastness and infinitude are only the fitting circumstances for his vast and infinite spirit. Meanwhile, he feels weak and almost contemptible in presence of the stupendous world which he himself has discovered. He lies open to gloom. The universe, which, as he will understand when he recovers strength, is really calling on him to rise to his true stature, he thinks, is mocking him for his past presumptuousness. It is arguable, at least, that this mood of misgiving and despondency before the vastness of the universe, has come down from the highest rank of thinkers, through minds less distinguished, until now it is present with us all like a shadow, whenever we think seriously about ourselves. For, when our strength is low, we refuse to be comforted; we look about for those facts in life which seem to corroborate our fears.

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And then, every mood is absolute so long as it lasts. When we are suffering from such a mood, when we are too conscious of the difficulty and stress of living, when we have an unhealthy fondness for words like "pathos" applied to the ordinary incidents of a life, when we are beginning to carry our heart on our sleeve, and to sigh over the universe in public, then we are in great need of a new and stirring word of faith from the soul of some healthy man. God has given to each of us the instinct to live and to cling to life. God has given to each the instinct that somehow he is fit to meet life, fit to bear up and to find a way in spite of all kinds of stress; the instinct that life itself—to breathe and to feel—is, above all question, good. This is the unconscious faith of children. But this instinct or unconscious faith has soon to meet the challenge of the world. These are the days of questioning when some grim fact —the sins of men, or our own sins, or the

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seeming triumph of evil here, or the heedlessness of God, or death and the grave—when some such fact assails our native gaiety so that we can never be the same. Then for the first time, we see tired faces in this world, and life has lost for ever its simplicity. At such a point "the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." Our most abiding instinct, viz., the instinct to live and to hope, is threatened. It is then that we need and must have *faith*. We must find such a way of looking at things as shall restore those energies which doubt has numbed and frozen. We must find some belief which shall transform the world for us, and reinforce the instinct of our childhood—to live with our whole strength.

Throughout his entire life Robert Browning was facing those questions which human observation and experience put to faith, those questions which have arisen in every age that has been led to reflect. Those facts and circumstances in life which seem

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hard to reconcile with faith in God, we are accustomed to gather into the phrase "the mystery of evil." Wordsworth called it "the burden of unintelligible things." You know what facts and circumstances are meant. For example, "we believe in God as the source and fountain of all things. How excellent is this world! How very good and fair is the face of nature! How pleasant it is to walk into the green country and to 'meditate in the fields at the eventide!' As we look round, we cannot but be persuaded that God is most good, and loves His creatures; yet amid all the splendour we see around us, the question comes to us, 'But why is there pain in the world?' We see that the brutes prey on each other, inflicting violent and unnatural deaths. And then think of the pain and misery which show themselves in the history of man — the miserable diseases and casualties of human life, and our sorrows of mind. Then the evils we inflict on each other, our sins and

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their awful consequences. Now, why does God permit such evil in His own world? This is the difficulty which we feel whenever we reflect upon life, and it is a difficulty which we are quite unable to solve. We see light here and there upon the mystery, but that only by faith, only by resolutely and repeatedly trusting it all, and trusting ourselves to God. We open the Bible; the great mystery is acknowledged there, but after the Scriptures have said all they have to say, it is left mysterious. It confesses that 'now we see through a glass, darkly,' that 'now we see not all things put under God.'"[1] Now does not all this seem to contradict the name of God as good and as supreme? That is the problem which, through all his life, Browning faced for his own soul's sake, and for all our sakes. That was the life-long battle which he waged, to secure and retain for man the right to believe and to hope still and for ever in God.

[1] J. H. Newman.

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The Mystery of Evil

Profoundly conscious as Browning is of the dark cloud of human experience, confessing, as he does, again and again that, if he had not faith in God, this life, with all it holds of pain and woe, "with its dread machinery of sin and sorrow," would confound him; nevertheless he sees very distinctly certain steady lights within the cloud, certain stars that peep through the blackness, and stay. He bids us look at these lights, and believe in those stars against all the blackness. For is it not true that if we can find any meaning in the mystery and problem of our life, then the blackness is past, we lose from that moment the feeling that there is no intelligence in the world, no sense, no purpose? When we see the meaning or any meaning we can at least bid our souls be patient.

In the first place, Browning has no difficulty in showing us that "the evil" in life is just the necessary opposition to "the good." We could not have good as we

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know it if evil as we know it did not exist. For example: virtue is possible only in a world where there is temptation.

> "Why comes temptation, but for man to meet
> And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
> And so be pedestall'd in triumph?"

If there were no hardness and pressure in life, there could not be such qualities of the soul as patience and heroism. If there were no sickness, poverty, death, there could be no sympathy or pity or kindness—"For how can man love but what he yearns to help?" If there were no sin in this world, if there were no sad failures amongst us, then there could be no forgiveness, and the purest tears would never have been shed—the tears of erring children coming home, and the tears of those at home who go out to meet them coming. If life were not a place of much darkness and mystery we had never learned to kneel and to pray; we had never discovered our need of God. In short, we do

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not see how the soul of man, as we know it, could have emerged at all, or could even now remain alive and eager, were it not that we have been placed in a world which is ever forcing us in upon ourselves, ever provoking the things of the Spirit—joy and grief, patience, faith and prayer. All our peculiar qualities as men, all the signs we have that we are something more than mortal, have appeared within us simply because life is what it is.

> "All to the very end is trial in life;
> At this stage is the trial of my soul,
> Danger to face or danger to refuse."

This leads to another standpoint from which Browning sees and interprets "the evil" in life.

Apart from the question, which really it is idle to raise, viz., whether human existence could have been otherwise ordained, *e.g.* without the possibility of pain or the intrusion of sin, it is certain that life as we have it is wonderfully contrived for the

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stirring up of the soul, and for the perfecting of human character. "This life is training and a passage." "The moral sense grows but by exercise." In "Rabbi ben Ezra," Browning raises an objection to his own teaching and answers it. A man might say as he reflected upon the vicissitudes of a life, thinking how we are hurled from change to change unceasingly, how we are evidently in the hands of One who lifts us up and casts us down—such an observer of the human lot might say, "who are we; what is a man that he should have hopes for himself? He seems to be the victim, not the master of his fate. He is the plaything of circumstances; he is like clay in the Potter's hand." Just so, says Browning, we are like clay in the Potter's hand. Life, like the Potter's wheel, bruises us, sets out as if to make something of us, then when we have almost reached the form of that particular thing, the wheel rolls over us; life beats us down and unmakes us. All this seems to urge us

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to personal despair; it seems to mean that we are the playthings of our Creator, mere clay in the Potter's hand. But suppose we take that rank—clay in the Potter's hand. Why, it is just there we base our confidence and build our song. For we cannot believe that the Creator has playthings and least of all that He plays with souls. A Potter is an intelligent being. He does not work with the clay for the mere sake of working. He works, on the one hand, for the sake of the clay, and on the other to show his skill and complete his design. Thus, the great Potter is making something of us. Look not at the beginning but at the end. Think not of the clay which you are, but of the *cup* which you will be when the Potter is done with you. Once more "'tis looking downward that makes one dizzy" and desperate. Think of the dignity that may await a cup. Think how one day the table may be spread in heaven, and how the Master of the Feast may lift the cup—you, that is to say, made

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perfect by the wheel of life! Thus you may give Him pleasure! Wherefore

"Look not thou down but up
To uses of a cup,
The festal board, lamps flash and trumpet peal,
The new wine's foaming flow,
The Master's lips aglow!
Thou heaven's consummate cup what needst thou
with earth's wheel?

"So, take and use Thy work
Around what flows may lurk
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the
aim!
My times be in Thy hand!
Perfect the cup as planned!
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the
same!" (*Rabbi ben Ezra.*)

That is a line of thought to which Browning comes back and back. Life is a training, an *education* of the soul. All the circumstances which beset man in his mortal passage have some high reason which the man himself may

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even now be aware of, and of which he will one day be aware.

"Man is not God, but hath God's end to serve,
A Master to obey, a course to take,
Somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become.
Grant this; then man must move from old to new,
From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
From what once seemed good, to what now proves best.
How could man have progression otherwise?"

The very burdensomeness of life, its tear and wear and pressure, is the surest proof to him that life means something vast and good. "Is it for nothing?" he asks, "we grow old and weak, we whom God loves?" And answers, No! but because, "when pain ends, gain ends too."

For Browning, then, the whole of human travail is penetrated with a purpose, and justified by its blessed consequence. Life is the pressure which brings the wine from the grape, the soul from the flesh. Life is the

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burden and mystery which discovers to a man his strange forlornness of spirit, but in that same moment discovers to him his kinship with the hidden God.

"Beyond the tale, I reach into the dark,
Feel what I cannot see, and still faith stands.
I can believe this dread machinery
Of sin and sorrow, would confound me else
Devised—all pain at most expenditure
Of pain by Who devised pain—to evolve
By new machinery in counterpart,
The moral qualities of man—how else?
To make him love in turn and be beloved,
Creative and self-sacrificing too,
And thus eventually God-like.
.
Enable man to wring out of all pain
All pleasure for a common heritage
To all eternity."

(*The Pope*, 1372.)

And so the soul that is sure of God sees through and accepts the whole scheme of pain and trial. Such an one—one, that is to say, who is willing to count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of

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God—will not be borne away from his centre and fund by any assault of the world. The more his faith is tried, the deeper will it hide itself in God. When the soul cannot see clearly, by reason of the darkness in things, it will cherish itself and sing and pray.

There is an old German tale which might be a parable of the purpose in our life of the unintelligible things. The story is told of a baron who, having grown tired of the gay and idle life of the Court, asked leave of his King to withdraw from it. He built for himself a fort on a rugged rock, beneath which rolled the Rhine. There he dwelt alone. He hung wires from one wing of the fort to the other, making an Æolian harp, on which the winds might play to solace him. But many days and nights had passed, and winds had come and gone, yet never had there been music from that harp. And the baron interpreted the silence as the sign of God's unremoved displeasure. One evening

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the sky was torn with wild, hurrying clouds, the sun was borne away with a struggle, and as night fell a storm broke out which shook the very earth. The baron walked restlessly through his rooms in loneliness and disquiet. At length he went out into the night, but stopped short upon the threshold. He listened and behold the air was full of music. His Æolian harp was singing with joy and passion high above the wildness and the storm. Then the baron *knew*. Those wires, which were too thick to give out music at the call of common days, had found their voice in a night of stress and storm. It needed the uttermost assault of nature to awake the slumbering song. So may it be with souls beset by life. All things are for our sakes—and we need them all. All things come—difficulty, defeat, disease, pain, old age, death in order that a man may discover the depths and secrets of his own nature, and from those depths cry out. "Strain" is a word which means stress; but it is likewise a word which

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means song; and it is only on a strained wire that the music sleeps. Thus

> "In the eye of God
> Pain may have purpose and be justified."

At this point we must observe that Browning always treats "the mystery of evil" as a personal problem. That is to say, he refuses to speak for others. He will speak only as he knows. He will only say how the human lot appears to him, and what he feels to be its intention. He will speak only for himself. But it is very evident that in Browning's opinion, if men were thorough and honest with themselves, they would speak as he speaks. They would confess that the experience which each man meets in life fits that man, body and soul; and that if he would only yield to its warning and appeal, his particular lot would make the best possible man of him. That is all that Browning will claim as certain. He believes more than that. He has his own firm hope concerning the things which lie

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beyond his knowledge. But he always comes back from any venture of imagination, back to the things he knows, because they are within himself. In "Ferishtah's Fancies," which is the poet's most mature and deliberate reading of life—and in the poem entitled "A Bean Stripe," someone asks—

> "Sir, be frank!
> A good thing or a bad thing, life is which?
> Shine and shade, happiness and misery
> Battle it out then; which force beats, I ask?"

To which Ferishtah (who is assuredly Browning himself) makes reply, "I will not answer such a question." No man can answer these ultimate questions for another. The answer to such a question is valid only for him who makes it. A soul's experience is not transferable. Each man is the centre of his own circumstances. The same things are not the same to different men. "For example," says Ferishtah, "it is reported that there are people who live in

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lands far North, where there is snow, and where the rivers congeal in their beds. To me, living in Persia, such a thing seems quite impossible; and yet people do live in such regions, and find life bearable. It is the same regarding the general mysteriousness and difficulty of human existence. I can speak only as I know. That is sufficient for me. I have not, for example, explored the sun; enough for me to feel its warmth. Let me thank Him who set the sun in the heavens, and Who made me so that I can feel the warmth and be content. Behind all those conveniences and accommodations which I find in life, I like to feel the kindness of God to me personally. Therefore I praise and worship Him.

> "The sense within me that I owe a debt
> Assures me—somewhere must be somebody
> Ready to take his due."

But perhaps you may say, "I have no right to leap to the conclusion that there is a per-

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sonal God. Why not worship the sun or honour the laws of nature?" To which Ferishtah replies with a stroke which Browning loved. "My friend," he says,—

"Suppose thou visit my lord Shalim Shah,
Bringing thy tribute as appointed. Here
Come I to pay my due. Whereat one slave
Obsequious spreads a carpet for thy foot.
His fellow offers sweetmeats, while a third
Prepares a pipe: what thanks or praise have they?
Such as befit prompt service. Gratitude
Goes past them to the Shah whose gracious nod
Set all the sweet civility at work!"

Or,—

"I eat my apple, relish what is ripe.
But, thank an apple! He who made my mouth
To masticate, my palate to approve,
My maw to further the concoction—Him
I thank, but for whose work the orchard's wealth
Might prove so many gall-nuts — stocks or stones,
For aught that I should think or know or care."

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In another of Ferishtah's Fancies—the one entitled "Cherries"—the poet makes the same defence of faith, and approaches the problem of existence from the personal standpoint. "Suppose," he says, "a stranger visiting the great palace at Ispahan. He moves through the spacious halls and corridors, observes the comfort of the place, and the wonder and the beauty. At last he sees his name, his very name, on the door of a room—inviting him to enter. He looks in and sees a nook fitted exactly for him, soul and body—the very colour of slippers that he likes, lamp, books, and every thing he would have had. What does the stranger do? What should he do? Go in, sit down, put on the slippers? Yes, but that only, or that first? No!

> "Who lives there
> That let me wonder at."

Just so, the soul which has become aware of its private blessings, aware of a touch here

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and there of the hand of God, cannot be hindered from calling upon itself to praise the Great Good God who contrived life as it is. The great and supreme gift of life to us who toil and suffer—and the harder our toil is the greater a blessing is the gift—the great and supreme gift of life, I say, is just the thought of God caring for the souls He made. And none can hinder me who have felt the goodness of God, from believing that all the magnificence of nature, the spacious heavens, the infinite sea, the whole region of the vast and the beautiful is, by God's appointment, the fitting pomp and pageantry of even the least of His children.

In the poem, "A Pillar at Sebzevar," Browning goes over the same line of proof once more—as if it were the teaching on the burden of unintelligible things in which he himself came to have most confidence. If you are sure of any blessing in your life, any real ground of gratitude, hold to it.

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Believe in it. That is for you a star in the steadfast heavens, although the sky may be black next moment and no star be seen for many days. Trust in the star which came and went. It will shine again. Cherish your personal blessings, and by their inspiration meet all that life may bring.

"So let us say—not 'since we know we love,'
But rather, since we love, we know enough."

Suppose you are travelling through the desert and are athirst. You come upon a hollow in the sand which holds pure water. There is only one scoopful. What will you do? Will you say, "No! I will not take a drop of that water until I have dug to, and have discovered, the source and fountainhead?" Not so you act. You kneel and take the scoopful. Next moment the hollow fills again, and again you empty it until your thirst is slaked. Just so must we do in this world—

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The Mystery of Evil

"Drain the sufficient drop and praise what checks
The drouth that glues thy tongue—what more
would help
A brimful cistern? Ask the cistern's boon
When thou wouldst solace camels: in thy case
Relish the drop and love the loveable."

To Browning, as he looks into "the mystery of evil," there is no question or doubt as to how all things shall end. The evil will pass whenever its use is done. "The child grown man, you burn the rod." So there is coming a time "when the uses of labour will be surely done." The very fact that life gives us the impression that it is incomplete, is proof that man carries about with him the hope of a better than this, and of a best of all. Somewhere in the course of his journey man has seen the land of Promise, or he has dreamed of it. If it was a dream, it was too good *not* to be true. Man lives by hopes "too fair to turn out false." For Browning cannot believe in a final contradiction between man and the world as it exists for God.

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The best is bound to be. Sometimes he tries to think the dread alternative, to realise what it would be "if all were error." But his mind sickens before the awful prospect, and the poet rightly takes that sickness, that first approach of madness, as corroboration of his instinctive faith in the triumph of God in the fulness of time.

Students of Browning must have in mind many glowing passages in which, after pages and pages of hard thinking maybe, the poet utters the everlasting hope of man. For never is Browning's voice so steady and melodious, never do the words come so simply and surely as when he is looking away to the end of the days.

"Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable Name?
Builder and maker Thou, of houses not made with hands!
What, have fear of change from Thee who art ever the same?
Doubt that Thy power can fill the heart that Thy power expands?

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There shall never be one lost good! What
was shall live as before;
The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying
sound,
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so
much good more:
On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven
the perfect round."

Or take the lines from the short piece "Apparent Failures"—

"My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
That after last returns the first,
Though a wide compass round be fetched,
That what began best, can't end worst,
Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst."

Though, for my own part, best of all I like the old Pope's stately hope:—

"While I see day succeed the deepest night
How can I speak but as I know?—my speech
Must be, throughout the darkness, 'it will end:
The light that did burn will burn.'

"So, never I miss footing in the maze,
No! I have light nor fear the dark at all."

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You may have gone out on some still clear night and looked up into the sky. There, in the west, was the crescent moon. You know at a glance that that moon will grow. The broken arc suggests the perfect round. Nay, more; look again if the night be fine. Do you not see with your unaided eye the rest of the circle traced dimly on the azure sky? Well, that crescent moon is like this human life of ours. The shadow which hides the moon's full face is the mystery which broods over and solemnises our passage through this earthly scene. But just as when we look at the crescent moon we feel instinctively that one day it will be complete, so the very shortcoming and incompleteness of our present life—the pain, the sin, the reign of death—all these do but promise a future time of triumphant and unhindered light. And just as on a clear still night, our eyes can already see the very outline of the perfect moon, so when our own soul is quiet and still, when there is no

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cloud, no bitterness between our own heart and God, then even here and now we can see by faith the tracing of that perfected order, the walls of the Holy Jerusalem, the fair fields where "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away."

But the poet utters a warning. As we have seen, he is very sure of the ultimate triumph of good. This, however, only on one condition—the condition, namely, that every soul which knows the good shall strive to the uttermost for the eventual victory.

> "God's in His heaven,
> All's right with the world!"

may be a craven cry. It may mean nothing more than that things are bound to end rightly, that good is bound to prevail, no matter how we acquit ourselves. But, according to Browning, and according to

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the fact, *good* which is not meanwhile in arms against evil is a mere name.

> " A thing is existent only while it *acts*,
> Does as designed, else a nonentity;
> For what is an idea unrealised."

Good will triumph if every soul which knows the good will hate and strive against the evil. The only proof that good will prevail at the last is that it prevails now. Knowing this, Browning is ever bidding men be faithful to themselves, and to God wherever they are. To obey on the instant the holy impulse.

> " Enough, for I may die this very night,
> And how should I dare die, this man let live!
> Quis pro Domino,
> Who is on the Lord's side?"

"I!" cries the old Pope.

Granted this strenuous behaviour on the part of men, each setting himself against the enemy at his own door, each defending the portion of the Kingdom of God which passes by his feet, each one addressing

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himself to the evil and the cruel and the contradictory which he sees and knows, then the final triumph of the good is assured. And besides, it is only such faithful fighters who are sure of the end. Only to them, to the earnest toilers, sufferers, doers, does life *feel* real and full of promise, for their faith is helping to create the very state of things for which they look and labour.

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The Incarnation

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IV

The Incarnation

ROBERT BROWNING himself would have been the first to admit that it mattered very little what he, a solitary man, happened to think of those questions which human existence raises, or what he happened to believe concerning that ultimate Reality which is in and through and over all things, and in and through and over man. He would have been the first to say—"things are what they are, and the end will be what it will be—no matter what you or I may think." For we do not alter the nature of things when we happen to look at them. They are what they are, and we are being borne on the breast of them—whether we struggle or consent—towards the untraversed land. Browning himself would have been the first to protest against the weakness of paying

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undue respect to any man's particular scheme of things, or of supposing that what any man may say concerning such mysteries as God and the soul, makes these vast names less mysterious.

For example, the truth about the Incarnation is what it is, regardless of those ventures of the mind whereby men have tried, through all ages, to realise the mystery of it. Browning did not invent the Incarnation as an escape from the difficulties of faith. He found the Incarnation and Belief in the Incarnation already in the world, and all that he has to say can only illuminate or darken—it cannot threaten or change—the Fact itself.

Speaking for myself I shall never cease to be thankful for the guidance which I have received from Robert Browning in this great matter of faith. It was a great blessing—in which I wish to see the hand of God—that just as I reached the age when a man should begin to think for himself, the age

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when he becomes aware, perhaps, of the apparent contradiction between faith and the world, when the instinctive confidence of childhood needs to be reinforced by some belief which satisfies both mind and heart—it was a great blessing that just then I opened "Browning." He knew my difficulties, and he showed no weakness toward "my sins and faults of youth." He taught me that the pure in heart alone see God. That God is silent to those who will not bring heart as well as mind, their whole emotional and moral life, as well as their powers of thought to the contemplation of the Unseen. He made me aware of the meaning of those words—"by faith we understand that the worlds were made by God." That we understand—by faith. It was a good thing to be compelled to pay the penalty of thought and intense imagination before accepting peacefully and for ever those supernatural facts which rise to our minds when we think of God—The Father,

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Son and Holy Ghost. It was a good thing that one was not allowed to receive the things of faith on mere hearsay, but only after the pains of thought and feeling. It was a good thing that those supernatural truths—those truths concerning God which lie at the heart of the Catholic Creed—should have come home to a man only when his heart and mind had become alive to the awful need of God. Otherwise, one might have received those great truths as mysteries altogether remote from our actual life and not to be embraced by the living heart and flesh. All that we believe concerning God must indeed be full of mystery, but Browning —I speak for myself—has done much to make the mystery no more a mystery of darkness but of light. He helps one not only to *believe* the ultimate matters of faith; but to *imagine* them. Take the doctrine of the Incarnation. Christians confess that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took on flesh and became man, that he might bring us to

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God. They confess that Jesus Christ came out from God, and was and is eternally in the bosom of God. That is what the Church asserts in the doctrine of the Incarnation. And now, conceive how hopelessly mysterious it all is. How our poor minds, however willing, break down as they try to comprehend all that such a faith implies! That the Almighty God has had with Him from all eternity, Another, His Like and Equal; that in the fulness of time, He came out from God and walked for a space upon our earth — how hard and impossible to realise it! Yet such is the Stupendous Fact which the doctrine of the Incarnation asserts. Now, I rise from another long study of Browning, thoroughly convinced that he for one held that faith in its essence, with his whole strength. He may have taken hold of this belief with the clutch of despair or of death. He may have flung himself into the arms of it only when he became aware of the abyss which waits for him and for us all if such a faith be not

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true. He may have rushed into belief in sheer horror of the blank alternative. But even were we to admit that, it would not weaken his testimony. The things of God are never learned easily; they come to us for the first time in hours of darkness and necessity. They come at our cries and prayers, however mildly they may remain with us in after years. They come at first through pain and a certain solitude of the soul. It may well be that Browning was led seriously to believe in the Incarnation, in the first instance, because he felt that some such overwhelming proof of God and of His love was needed to out-weigh the appalling misery which he found in the world as it is. He himself confesses more than once that it is only his faith in God, as God has revealed Himself in Christ, which stands between him and despair.

"I can believe this dread machinery
Of sin and sorrow would confound me else
Devised—*all pain at most expenditure*
Of pain by Who devised pain."

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That is to say, the burden which falls upon his spirit as he beholds the suffering and the incompleteness here, is relieved and can at least be borne when he remembers that God Himself has entered into the region of pain, "bearing our sins and carrying our sorrows." In "A Death in the Desert" we have the same confession, that all is well if in Jesus Christ man saw for once the Face of God.

> "I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ
> Accepted by thy reason, solved for thee
> All questions in the earth and out of it."

In "Paracelsus" he makes Festus cry out, in an hour of sore darkness—

> "God, Thou art Love! I build my faith on that."

But, to say that Browning clung to the Incarnation of God in Christ only as a drowning man clings to a life-belt, "lest the proud waters should overwhelm him," is only to place Browning in this matter by the side of S. Paul. How are those lines of Browning's

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different in their tone or in their philosophy from those strong cries of the Apostle with which he swept the midnight from his soul? How do they differ from S. Paul's—"He that spared not His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" or from that "Quis Separabit" in the eighth chapter of "Romans," which ended doubtless some unrecorded battle of the soul?

Leaving the question as to how, in the first instance, Browning was led to give his thorough assent to the doctrine of the Incarnation, certain it is that faith in that doctrine lies at the root of all his thoughts. I know of no poet who speaks with such consistent reverence and such ready rapture of Christ as he. All the light that lies across his fields of thought comes from that Sun alone. Now, just as there are hours in each day, when, although we do not see the very sun, we have its light and warmth and by the help of these, do our work; so there are,

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of course, pages upon pages of Browning in which all that we have of the Incarnation is the daylight which it gives. But just as there are fine days and exquisite hours, in which we have not only the daylight but the sun itself throbbing in the naked heavens; so there are poems of Browning's in which he rises from the common daylight, pursues it to its source, pierces mist and cloud until he pauses on the threshold of the Eternal order and looks with adoration towards the sun, across the blue.

Perhaps I shall best represent Browning's teaching on the Incarnation and his method of realising the mystery of it, if I describe somewhat in detail the two poems in which he deliberately announces his belief in that doctrine. I mean the poems, "Christmas Eve" and "Saul." There are others, such as "A Death in the Desert," passages from "The Ring and the Book" and from "Ferishtah's Fancies," and one notable passage in "Blougram's Apology," the

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short poem, "An Epistle," also the "Epilogue to Dramatis Personæ," in which his belief in the Incarnation, supported by certain reasons, emerges. But in the two poems I have named, "Christmas Eve" and "Saul," Browning is engaged entirely and solely with that doctrine.

In "Christmas Eve" the poet found himself on a wild winter's night—it was Christmas Eve, hence the title—at the door of a mean chapel. He slipped into the porch for shelter, and stood there while the worshippers passed in. After a time, he likewise entered and sat down. The preaching was crude and noisy and familiar without any suggestiveness —at least to the poet—of the deep things of God. Hurt by the man's narrowness and sourness, the poet rose and left the place, and stood under the night-sky. *There* was a scene more suggestive to him of God. At the invitation of the night and the stars, his tongue is loosed, and high thoughts, imaginations, praise and prayer hurry from his soul—

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The Incarnation

"In youth I looked to those very skies
And, probing their immensities,
I found God there, His Visible *Power*;
Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
Of the *Power*, an equal evidence
That His *Love*, there too, was the nobler dower:
For the loving worm within its clod
Were diviner than a loveless God
Amid His worlds, I will dare to say."

.

"So, gazing up, in my youth, at love
As seen through power, ever above
All modes which make it manifest,
My soul brought all to a single test—
That He, the Eternal First and Last
Who, in His *Power*, had so surpassed
All man conceives of what is Might—
Whose *wisdom*, too, showed infinite,
Would prove as infinitely *good*;
Would never (my soul understood),
With power to work all love desires,
Bestow e'en less than man requires;
That He who endlessly was teaching,
Above my spirit's utmost reaching,
What love can do in the leaf or stone,
(So that, to master this alone,
This done in the stone or leaf or me,
I must go on learning endlessly),

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Would never need that I, in turn,
Should point *Him* out defect unheeded,
And show that God had yet to learn
What the meanest human creature needed,
—Not life, to wit, for a few short years
Tracking his way through doubts and fears,
While the stupid earth on which I stay
Suffers no change, but passive adds
Its myriad years to myriads,
Though I, He gave it to, decay,
See death come and choose about me,
And my dearest ones depart without me.
No: *love* which on earth, amid all the shows of it
Has ever been seen the sole good of life in it,
The love, ever growing there, spite of the strife in it,
Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it,
And I shall behold Thee, face to face,
O God, and in Thy love retrace
How in all I loved here, still wast Thou!
Whom, pressing to, then, as I fain would now,
I shall find as able to satiate
The love, Thy gift, as my spirit's *wonder*
Thou art able to quicken and sublimate
With this sky of Thine, that I now walk under
And glory in Thee for, as I gaze
Thus, thus! . . ."

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As he gazed in silence upon that huge sky, this is what he saw. The moon, at the full, lay resting on a fleecy cloud, "in a triumph of whitest white." Above it, the high dome of the night; while yet higher and deeper, the circle of a rainbow spanning the heaven of heavens. As his eye climbed those terraces of light and paused at the zenith of the darkness, he felt as if the heavens were about to open and Some One about to step out from the place of God upon that highest ring.

> "Oh, whose foot shall I see emerge,
> Whose from the straining topmost dark
> On to the keystone of that arc?"

Next moment the tempest had returned, blinding him, and when it cleared he saw the figure of Christ—

> "He was there,
> He Himself with the human air
> On the rainbow pathway, just before."

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But Christ's back was towards him, and suddenly the poet understood. Christ was on His way from that mean meeting-house. He had been there and doubtless was now angry because the poet had gone away. Therefore the poet hastened after Him and begged forgiveness. He pleaded that he had left the chapel because he thought the preacher spoke and felt too meanly of God, too meanly and poorly of His love in Christ; that it was because he—the poet—placed Christ higher than those grudging worshippers that he had left them, wishing to be alone to adore. Whereupon Christ turned His face full upon Him so that he became unconscious through the excess of glory. From this experience the poet learns that Christ Himself holds it to be His chief glory that He is the Love of God; and learns also that those who—in spite of the bareness and narrowness of their creed—believe somehow that God in Christ has given Himself in Love to men, have a hold of the hem of His Garment.

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Suddenly the poet finds himself in Rome, witnessing the great festival of Christmas-Eve. He is aware that there is much foolery and grotesqueness in what he sees; but he has learned that there too the worshippers have at least a hold of the hem of Christ's garment. They are seeking to reassure themselves of the Incarnation, and are bearing witness to their faith before the world. He will not quarrel with their methods, though for himself he despises them. He will rather rejoice that they are doing what they are doing to the glory of Him,

> "Who trod,
> Very man and very God,
> This earth in weakness, shame and pain."

Once more the scene is changed. The poet is looking into a class-room in the University of Göttingen. The professor mounts his place and proceeds to discuss what he calls the myth of Christ. He explains away all that might be thought miraculous or mys-

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terious in the person of Christ, until he reaches what he says is the naked truth. And what is the truth about Christ according to this professor. This only: that Christ was a good and high-souled man, who suffered for righteousness' sake, leaving us an example. A chill creeps over the poet's body and seems to settle down on his heart as he listens. He feels passionately and instinctively that this man has not even the hem of Christ's garment, that the truth is not here. The chill at his heart persuades him. He listens again. The Professor, as he concludes, bids his students—even though they can no longer worship Christ or place their hopes on Him—reverence the myth, cherish the pure and pathetic story of his life and death. And here Browning warms to the controversy, in a bantering way no doubt, but we know from our past studies that Browning is never in such dead earnest as when he banters. He only banters when he knows that he has the game in his hand.

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And so he plies the Göttingen professor with rapid thrusts; showing him what his advice —"to reverence the myth"—amounts to. It is no longer Christ who is to support us; according to the new style it is we who are to support Christ, support Him and keep Him alive by our application and study. "Well, well," he says,

> "Deduce from this lecture all that eases you;
> Nay, call yourselves, if the calling pleases you,
> 'Christians'—abhor the deist's pravity—
> Go on, you shall no more move my gravity
> Than, when I see boys ride a-cockhorse,
> I find it in my heart to embarrass them
> By hinting that their stick's a mockhorse
> And they really carry what they say carries them."

Next moment he is back in the mean little chapel, in which indeed he had all the while been dreaming; and the poem ends with a warning to those who might suppose from its jaunty movement that Browning was not profoundly concerned in the great Matter of Faith, which has been the subject of it all.

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Up to this point we have been engaged rather in proving that Browning believed in the Incarnation, than in recommending that doctrine to others. It remains to us to discover the method by which Browning realised the doctrine so that it did not remain as a merely mysterious truth at an exalted distance from his mind, but came near to him and became the basis and power of his daily life as a man and as a thinker. Although our first quotation from "Christmas Eve"—the long one—contains the substance of Browning's teaching on the Incarnation, we must look more deliberately at those ideas if we are to feel their full force, and are to be convinced. I think we shall come at them most easily if we look at the poem "Saul," where we find those ideas living and acting. The poem is based upon the incident in 1 Samuel xvi., where we read how when the evil spirit afflicted King Saul, he sent for David to play before him, and how when "David took the harp and played with his

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hand, Saul was refreshed and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him."

Abner meets young David at the door of the tent, where for three days King Saul had been sitting in darkness, and with his soul in darkness. As the old soldier sees the fresh lad, "with God's dew on his gracious gold hair," and the lilies twined round his harp-strings as if the world held nothing but beauty, he felt—though he could have given no reason —that the soul of Saul would be set free, when all this freshness and innocence had looked up into his face. David having knelt and prayed, entered the darkness. "Here is David, thy servant." But no voice replied. Slowly, as his eyes became used to the darkness, he saw the grand figure of the King standing erect in the centre. David said not a word, but tuned his harp and played. First he played the tune that the sheep know, which calls them home in the evening. Then the tune which makes the quails follow the player. Then the wine-song, which the

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reapers sing when standing amid the fulness of the harvest they feel the joy of life. Then he played the funeral-dirge when the dead man is praised on his journey. "Bear, bear him along," the harp seemed to say, "with his few faults shut up like dead flowerets. The land has none left such as he on the bier. Oh, would we might keep thee, my brother." And then he played the marriage hymn. Then he played a battle-song, when strong men forget to fear. Then the chorus of the priests as they draw near to the altar. Then David stopped, for there in the darkness Saul groaned. His head moved, causing the jewels in his turban to flash. It was as if life was coming back to him. Then David bent over his harp and sang. He sang of the beauty of God's world, and the good gift of life. He sang of cool rivers and shady trees, of the hunt and the welcome sleep among the bulrushes. Then he began to sing the story of King Saul—the story as it might have been, as it still was, beyond

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the walls of the poor king's dismal mind. He sang of Saul's father, and of the early days, of Saul's boyhood, that boyhood of wonder and hope; of the marvellous ways of God, by which Saul was now become king. He sang of Saul's brave deeds, of his beauty and his strength, how nature and the people's choice and God's anointing, all crowned King Saul. As his song had been coming to its close, the minstrel's heart had grown warm. He had felt the stir of the old stories, so that when the last word had to be sounded, and David cried—"Saul!"—'twas the trump of the Lord and of a nation. Then "Saul was struck by his name." And suddenly, as the piled-up avalanche cracks and rushes down the mountain-side, leaving the mountain black and bare, yet capable of verdure by-and-by, so the blackness rolled away from the soul of Saul. Death was past, but life had not yet come. His hand held his brow, then fell; then arm folded arm across his chest. Thus he stood. But what should

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the minstrel sing now? How keep Saul free? How hinder him from falling back, how lift him sheer out of the toils and the shame of the past? Again the minstrel bent over his harp and sang, "But 'twas Thou, O God, who didst give him the song." He sang of the progress of life, of those stages and levels that speak of a triumph in the fulness of the days. He sang the blessed Gospel, that by God's mercy the past may be past for ever. How the best may yet be coming. Is Saul dead? So be it: "In the depth of the vale make his tomb." Let a new Saul arise from the grave of the old.

As he sang, making the offer of a new beginning to the man, the look of care passed from Saul. A great gentleness came over him; some hard thing had melted away. He drew the young lad towards him, and sat down. Thus he sat for long, stroking David's yellow hair. And oh, how David loved him then! He yearned to fill Saul's

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life with love and with the power to be great for ever.

> "Could I help thee, my father, inventing a bliss
> I would add, to that life of the past, both the future and this,
> I would give thee new life altogether, as good, ages hence,
> As this moment—had love but the warrant, love's heart to dispense."

"Then the truth came upon me," says David, who has up to this point been speaking. But now Browning himself pours out his soul, though still speaking in David's name. And this is his message. "I see the truth now and thus. As a man, I have a certain faculty for knowledge. But how poor and weak compared with the Divine Wisdom which appears in this orderly universe! I have forethought; but how weak it is beside the Infinite Care of God! Every faculty which I have, I find already displayed to an infinite degree by God. Now, this day as I played before Saul to deliver him from

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his frenzy, as I looked upon his weakness and his loneliness, I loved him. I, a poor erring child myself, I loved him. Ah, will not God love him more! How God must love him! Is it to be thought that God, who has given me my faculties, Himself has them not in infinite fulness? If ninety-nine doors open, why should the hundredth appal? If God exceeds me in the least things, will He fall behind me in the greatest? Here, in this great matter of loving, loving the weak, the broken-hearted, the rebellious, shall the creature surpass the Creator? Would I do all for that man; and will God do nothing? Would I sacrifice myself in order to rescue the true Saul from his fetters; and will God be less loving than I? Never! 'Tis Thou, God, that givest, 'tis I who receive. The love I feel is already in Thee before it could be in me. What is it that stops my despair as I think of my own helplessness to remove Saul's misery or the world's misery? This: that what I would do, God has done or will

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do. Or to quote from Browning elsewhere :—

"This good God—what He could do, if He would,
Would if He could—then must have done long since;
If so, when, where, and how? Some way must be—
Once feel about, and soon or late you hit
Some sense in which it might be, after all,
Why not, The Way, The Truth, The Life."

He surely—

"Would never need that I, in turn,
Should point Him out defect unheeded,
And show that God had yet to learn
What the meanest human creature needed."

No!

"Would I suffer for one that I love? So wouldst Thou, so wilt Thou.
So shall crown Thee the topmost ineffablest uttermost crown—
And Thy Love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up nor down

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One spot for the creature to stand in! It is by no breath,
Turn of eye, wave of hand, that Salvation joins issue with death!
As Thy Love is discovered Almighty, almighty be proved,
Thy Power that exists with and for it of being beloved!
He who did most, shall bear most; the strongest shall stand the most weak!
'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! My flesh that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a man like to me
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever; a Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! see the Christ stand!"

When he reached this thought, and had made it ring like a proclamation through his own soul—the thought of God out of the stress of love, giving Himself to man—David, *i.e.* Browning himself tells us—all nature took on a different look. The hills, grey with

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early morn, the beasts of the field, the birds, the purling brooks, all murmured to his spirit, "Even so, it is so."

There are two criticisms which might be made upon Browning's teaching on the Incarnation. We shall do little more than mention them; for after feeling the thrill of faith which never fails to come to me as I read "Saul," I confess I have little interest in difficulties. It might be objected that it was unwarrantable to build a doctrine of God's nature upon anything in human nature. That Browning's teaching is the merest anthropomorphism. But Browning himself was well aware of that. He, however, looked at the relation between God and man from the opposite standpoint. To your objection that he was making a God in his own image, he would have replied, "What you mean is that God has made man in *His* image"; which is the old story. As he says:—

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"Take all in a word; the truth in God's breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed:
Though He is so bright and we so dim,
We are made in His Image to witness Him."

Are our religious instincts to be trusted, or is the light that is in us darkness? These are the alternatives. In other regions what we call truth is truth absolute and eternal. Two and two make four here and in every conceivable world. We have the instinct that this is an orderly world—all our sciences are based upon that assumption. Is it to be supposed that in the region of our peculiar endowment as human, in our sense of what is ethically right and the very highest, we should be deceiving ourselves? Can "a Cosmos have a Chaos for its crown?" Love —the giving away of oneself, the spending, the toiling, the bearing, the pardoning, the helping for the sake of others, for their good, to make them pure, gentle, holy—love is the highest and the best we know. But the effect can never be greater than its cause;

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the Creature cannot surpass his Creator. The highest we know must at least be within God. At least—for He must ever transcend our most penetrating reach in what is good. He must have within Himself our best and more. Every good gift and every perfect gift cometh down from above; from the Father and Home of these lights.

Once more, it might be objected to Browning's teaching on the Incarnation, and, indeed, to any belief in the Incarnation that there are many things in this present scene which made it hard to hold. But with Browning a faith must always be hard to hold; faith is the contradiction of many signs.

> "You must mix some uncertainty
> With faith if you would have faith be."

He would ask you to trust those moments when the grand hope seemed true to you. He would appeal to you to believe in the stars which you see for a fine moment now

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